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Cambodia: No hands are clean

By Arnold R. Isaacs

This spring, as our newspapers, magazines and TV networks will shortly begin reminding us, 10 years will have passed since the Vietnam War ended in sudden and dramatic triumph for the communists and humiliation for the United States.

Another war-related anniversary deserves notice, too, because in many ways it represents the start of the cruelest tragedy of our era. Exactly 15 years ago—March 18, 1970—a group of ambitious Cambodian politicians and military commanders deposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's head of state. From that event flowed all that has happened to Cambodia since then—five years of increasingly brutal war, four years of slave labor and mass killings under the Khmer Rouge and six years [so far] of Vietnamese occupation and continuing guerrilla conflict.

Kerry Waghorn

Norodom Sihanouk

Under Sihanouk, Cambodia had skirted the war that was ravaging its neighbors, Vietnam and Laos, in the 1960s. Its neutrality was violated, first by the Vietnamese communists who set up bases on Cambodian territory and then by the U.S. response, which eventually escalated into the massive though secret B-52 bombing campaign against the sanctuary areas. Away from the remote and thinly populated border region, however, the rest of Cambodia remained at peace.

Sihanouk's overthrow, which occurred while he was traveling between Moscow and Peking trying to negotiate a Vietnamese withdrawal, upset that equilibrium. It is true that the events leading to his downfall were in part the result of his own miscalculations and abuses of power. But it's also true that the Americans and their Vietnamese adversaries, in seeking ways to turn Cambodian events to their military advantage, paid little heed to the dire impact of their decisions on Cambodia and its 7 million people.

That, in a way, set the pattern for everything that followed. Cambodians on all sides of the conflict must bear a substantial burden of blame for the events of the last 15 years, but so must the cynical strategies and moral obtuseness of other nations, including the United States. At no time since 1970 have the contending powers in the region—the U.S., Vietnam, China, Thailand or the other noncommunist countries of Southeast Asia—given real consideration to Cambodian needs. Instead, they have followed policies that could only result in more Cambodian death and suffering.

Sihanouk, who aligned himself with an increasingly barbarous communist movement, is by no means blameless in his country's extended catastrophe. A grievous share of responsibility must also be laid, however, to the men who overthrew him. [The prince himself blamed the CIA. Some of the plotters had collaborated in earlier U.S. covert activities in Cambodia, but there has been no evidence of direct American involvement in the 1970 coup.]

After seizing power, Cambodia's new rulers under Gen. Lon Nol set out to expel the Vietnamese by force, instead of diplomacy or persuasion. But they failed to understand the limits imposed by Cambodia's military weakness, and they fatally misjudged the U.S. response—believing, as one diplomat in Phnom Penh said, that "the Americans were the same Americans of 1963, that they would rain down money, soldiers, and so on. They didn't know Americans have changed."

In fact, by 1970, domestic opposition to the war made a large-scale U.S. intervention in Cambodia politically impossible. The "incursion" of U.S. troops caused such an uproar that all American units had to be withdrawn only two months later. That should have indicated the limited American ability to protect Cambodia. Yet the Nixon administration, which could have warned the new Cambodian leaders against marching into a war they couldn't win, chose instead to encourage their hopeless fight.

In those decisions, the U.S. was guided by the narrowest possible military considerations, having to do almost exclusively with the tactical situation of its own forces in Vietnam. What would happen to Cambodia played almost no part in American calculations, and the stated U.S. policy there after its own forces were withdrawn was schizophrenic—supporting the Lon Nol government with aid, arms and air power while declaring the U.S. had no "commitment" to Cambodia's defense.

It took several years for that commitment to be avowed. By then, Cambodia's land and spirit were already devastated, and the outcome of the war—the defeat of the Lon Nol regime and of every American purpose in Cambodia—was all but assured.

The war that spread through Cambodia after Prince Sihanouk's overthrow became a conflict of terrible brutality. Between 1970 and 1975, about one out of every 10 Cambodians died in the fighting between the U.S.-backed Khmer Republic and the Vietnamese and Cambodian communist forces. Half the population were driven from their homes. The violence tore apart the country's social fabric. And America's ally, Lon Nol, was weak and inept.

The character of the communist side, meanwhile, was changing more quickly and drastically than was recognized in Phnom Penh or Washington. The Vietnamese communists, whom the Americans saw as the principal enemy, played a significant role in the Cambodian war only until about the end of 1972, after which a native Cambodian insurgency took over the battlefields. That force, at first a welter of factions with different ideologies and loyalties, came increasingly under the control of its most fanatical component, the Khmer Rouge, whose primitive fury was aimed at their Cambodian enemies and at their former Viet Cong and North Vietnamese partners.

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By the time they marched into Phnom Penh in 1975, the Khmer Rouge leaders were gripped by a deadly amalgam of ancient and modern hatreds that were channeled into a mindless, frenzied violence against their own people.

Under their rule, the country was turned into a huge slave-labor camp where it is calculated that up to 3 million people were murdered or died of exhaustion, starvation or disease. Only the destruction of European Jews by the Nazis seems comparable. Yet a world that had responded to the Holocaust with endless repetitions of "never again" reacted hardly at all to Cambodia.

In the end, neither the U.S. nor any other Western nation or organization did anything to stop the slaughter. The Khmer Rouge would probably still rule Cambodia today if territorial and ideological disputes, ethnic hatred and opposing alliances—theirs with China and Hanoi's with the Soviet Union—had not led them into an escalating conflict with communist Vietnam.

In the last days of 1978, that confrontation burst into full-scale war. Vietnamese tanks and infantry invaded Cambodia and in less than two weeks drove

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the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh. The top Khmer Rouge leaders and the remnants of their army retreated westward into pockets of wilderness near the Thai border, from which they mounted a guerrilla resistance.

For the last year or so, two noncommunist factions, one loyal to Sihanouk and the other led by former Lon Nol supporters, have participated in the resistance, too. Their chief contribution, however, has been to make Western support seem somehow more palatable. In fact, the Khmer Rouge remain the strongest and senior partner in the resistance movement and would certainly dominate any regime that might follow a hypothetical guerrilla victory. There should be no illusion about the fact that the Khmer Rouge, not their partners, are the real beneficiary of Western policies that help keep the resistance alive.

This year, as a new Vietnamese offensive has once again put images of violence and flight and suffering on American television screens and magazine covers, the tangled background of the conflict remains only dimly seen or understood. Much of the reporting and rhetoric has been focused exclusively on the Vietnamese occupation, as if none of the events before 1979 ever existed. The truth is that there is no single villain in the story. In Cambodia's long tragedy, no one's hands are clean.

Arnold R. Isaacs is the author of "Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia."

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